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AUTHOR Steward, Robbie J.; Borgers, Sherry B.
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the need for educators to work from a systems approach and become more involved in understanding the culture and family of minority students if these students are to learn the skills necessary to cope in school and society. The focus of the paper is on the Black student and begins with three vignettes, examples of questions they raise, and suggestions for new ways of conceptualizing students. Basic systemic concepts and the rationale for their importance are discussed as follows: (1) individuals are not closed systems, consequently it is necessary to view problems within a context such as the family; (2) parts of a system or persons within a system are interdependent, and when one person changes others are affected; (3) a family is more than just the sum of the individuals, rather it comprises a system with a distinct character of its own; (4) in the family system there is a hierarchy; (5) families are rule bound systems that have developed over time; (6) all families have two competing forces (homeostasis--stability and morphogenesis--the force for change); and (7) causality is circular not linear. A summary emphasizes that educators need to form a collaborative relationship with the family and work from a position of cooperation rather than competition. (LL)

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Rethinking Teacher Education: Collaboration Between the Black Family and the School System

Robbie J. Steward, Ph.D.

Sherry B. Borgers, Ed.D.

The University of Kansas

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According to Pinderhughes (1989) efforts to work with Black families are often seriously hampered by the fact that Black Culture is not considered an important issue. Historically culture and especially minority cultures have been ignored. It has not become clear that efforts to work with individuals must take into account the fact that their culture is manifest in values, norms, behaviors and ways of living and that these represent people's adaptations to the social realities they face. Mental health has moved in this direction, and it is becoming necessary that education move toward a systems theory as they work with diverse ethnic groups (Pinderhughes, 1989). The systems model suggests dynamic interaction between social factors such as employment and personal factors such as functioning in school (Inclan & Ferran, 1990). Systems theory views the world as organized at levels that range from the individual (microsystemic) to society and its values (macrosystemic). Education from a systems theory point of view would take a broader view of students. Rather than looking at the student in school, one would need to be aware of the influence of the person's total social network including health and social services, the police and court system, the job market, the welfare system as well as the educational system (Brown & Parnell, 1990).

The thesis of this paper is that educators need to work from a systems view and become more involved in understanding the culture and family of minority students if these students are to learn the skills necessary to cope in school and society. The focus of this paper is on the Black student. The paper is organized into three parts: (1) three vignettes and examples of questions they raise, (2) basic systemic concepts and the rationale for their importance, and (3) summary.

Within Group Diversity Among Black Students

Vignette 1:

Ray is a new student in your class who is Black and the eldest of four in his family. There is no father in the home, and his mother works at night. They live in a very poor section of town. Ray is neatly dressed, but his clothes are obviously worn and somewhat outdated. He is quiet but often you feel challenged when he asks questions.

If this is the only information a teacher has, it would be easy to make incorrect assumptions based on common myths coming from the "deficit theory of Black achievement" (Shade, 1979). For example, an assumption might be that Ray will not achieve because he came from a single parent family of lower socio-economic status. However, in this instance the fact is that he is a good student, excellent in math and weak in English, but a neighbor's daughter helps him with English. His family finds him help when he needs it, and he has a close relationship with his mother, siblings, grandparents and other community members. He is a leader in his church youth organization and has been playing the piano since he was four. He is seen as a good boy by his family and neighbors and treated with respect by them. More knowledge would have helped the teacher to know that he is in many ways typical of the academically successful Black student (Schultz, 1969).

Vignette 2:

Sheila is a new student who is articulate, poised and attractive. She transferred midyear from a private school in the South with a GPA of 3.86 and an ACT score of 27. Her parents are professionals and upwardly mobile. An assumption might be that Sheila will excel and needs no special help, but the reality is that she is having an extremely difficult time because she misses her extended family and she comes from a strong Black middle class community. Her current school and community have less than a 2% minority population. This would be an extremely difficult situation for Sheila who has lost her sense of belonging.

Vignette 3:

John's mother was asked to come for a school conference concerning John's attendance but did not come; John came alone. John has two brothers in prison. Three other older siblings who live at home, as well as a 16 year old sister who is pregnant for the second time. All except John have dropped out of school. John manages to pass most courses and has not been in trouble with the law. At first glance this scenario seems dismal and worthy of little hope. It is important to know that with such a student there is potential for the school system to have a powerful impact. The earlier the student and the dysfunctional family are identified, the stronger the possible impact.

john has at some time been influenced to believe in the importance of education and is struggling to stay in school in spite of his family history.

Family Systems Concepts

Some of the concepts derived from Systems Theory and applied to family therapy by people such as Bowen (1978), Haley (1971), and Satir (1972) can be useful to teachers in order to increase their knowledge and suggest new ways of conceptualizing students such as these where an understanding of family and culture are important.

The first concept is that individuals are not closed systems; consequently, it is necessary to view problems within a context such as the family. Problems such as John's not coming to school cannot be understood outside the family, and the most effective interventions must take the family system, functional or dysfunctional, into account. In John's case he should be reinforced for coming. Since he is the only family member present, educators must consistently work with him in order to expand the sense of community that could positively influence him and continue the education process. Involvement in structured school activities may increase his sense of belonging and help him to maintain the necessary commitment to education. Working together to identify both short and long-term goals to assist him in looking beyond his present condition may also be helpful; students in dysfunctional families often experience difficulty seeing beyond the present without assistance and emotional support. Once a teacher understands the need to view problems in the context of the family, the problem will become more clearly defined and interventions that address the problem can be made as opposed to insisting that John miss no more school or that a conference cannot be held without a parent.

Another important concept is that parts of a system or persons within a system are interdependent, and when one person changes others are affected. An important example of this is if teachers change their way of responding to students, they will find that students will start to respond differently in class. Ray might become less challenging and more trusting when teachers respond to him with respect and praise instead of criticism. The cross-cultural literature (Rubovitz,

1973) suggests that Black gifted achievers often receive less attention and praise and are the most criticized in the classroom. Teachers must avoid responding in this manner; in order to do that they must have knowledge in cross-cultural studies and assume responsibility for the fact that they can affect student response by changing their own behaviors and preconceived beliefs about particular group members.

A third concept is that a family is more than just the sum of the individuals; rather it comprises a system with a distinct character of its own. Generational history affects the present day family. In Sheila's case she has come from a strong middle class Black community and has attended private Black schools. It would be helpful for the teacher to know that while Sheila's immediate family situation has not changed, her whole sense of community has and that she may be experiencing reactions from others, such as racial bias and prejudice, which she has never experienced prior to this semester. Such stress could be devastating for her both personally and academically even though her ability level would indicate that she should be able to function above average quite easily.

Still another concept is that in the family system, there is a hierarchy. Teachers must acknowledge this and respect it. In John's case he may be the most functional member and the one who has the most contact with the world outside of his current living situation. Teachers might help John develop a plan of action to influence his continuing the education process. Sending a letter to John's mother indicating this plan and validating John's current successes could be one strategy. Although his mother may be unable to come to school, she might welcome a letter that did not make demands on her. Speaking negatively of his family members should be avoided because important emotional ties to the family might exist even though it is a dysfunctional. John should not have to choose between his family and his education.

A fifth concept is that families are rule bound systems that have developed over time. There are two kinds of rules, explicit and implicit; the implicit rules may be the more powerful in maintaining the systems. It is imperative that teachers realize the students with whom they work have all kinds of rules that govern what can be communicated and to whom. There may be a

family rule that children will help with financial responsibilities. John may be hesitant to indicate that he cannot come to school because he has to work, but he may have a strong family rule about helping family members in need.

All families have two competing forces: homeostasis (or stability) and morphogenesis which is the force for change. While the school may push for change, it must be recognized that there are powerful forces that do not encourage change. When all is well, homeostasis is maintained with little effort, but in times of crisis, adjustments must be made. Sheila's need to belong at school may directly influence parental expectations of her academic performance. Any difficulty she might experience in making friends could affect her self-concept, her academic performance, parental expectations of that performance and consequently family dynamics. The teacher would need to engage in collaborative efforts with Sheila and her family so that the student could develop a sense of belonging both at home and at school without academic success being negatively affected.

Another basic concept is that causality is circular not linear. Cause and effect are interchangeable. In the case of John, there are many issues, and one person cannot be blamed or seen as the problem. The school and the teacher are part of the system and cannot conceptualize the problem in terms of what a parent does or does not do. It must be acknowledged that education has not meant the same for Blacks; in fact, Black college graduates are unemployed as frequently as White males who are not high school graduates (U.S. Civil Rights Commission, 1982). Consequently, Black families may have mixed reactions, hope and suspicion, toward educators and education. Instead of blaming the family, teachers need to see suspiciousness as a normal reaction to contradictory information and the daily reality of the family. When John sees few people he knows who succeed, it is hard for him to believe he will be able to be successful.

Summary

For education to be more effective, there are going to have to be changes. A primary change is that educators need to think in terms of the family system rather than seeing the child in isolation. This means that teachers need to understand cross-cultural concepts and what these mean for the children with whom they work. Teachers need to form a collaborative relationship with the family and work from a position of cooperation rather than one of competition; they must come from strengths, not deficits. For example, if a family is having pressures such as job stress or developmental changes, a teacher may have to assist the family in responding to these stresses before the academic issues are dealt with; adjustments may have to be made. Families must be empowered to deal with stressful situations. Aponte (1976) emphasizes the importance of organizing services from an ecological perspective, meaning that there is a fit rather than a conflict between needs and services provided.

It is important that students from all racial and ethnic groups have a chance for academic success. If this is to happen educators may need to: (1) engage in self-examination in the area of values and prejudicial thinking and increase awareness of the negative impact of these on others; (2) courageously challenge themselves as well as the system to become more accepting of ethnic and racial differences; (3) commit to expanding the knowledge base in cross-cultural issues and multicultural education; (4) initiate ongoing relationships with students' family members and/or interested parties early in the year; and (5) attend with interest to the unique needs of all students within the school system.

As professionals who work to enhance the education of students, educators must be aware of cultural and social factors that affect individuals today. These may not always be visible in the classroom that are present and are reflected in both the family and the school. The emphasis needs to be both on microsystemic personal influences and their interaction with macrosystemic structural forces (Inclan & Ferran, 1990). Working in this way is truly collaboration and should move us toward a better future for all.

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